

Paradigm Shift or 'Business as Usual'? Researching Change and Continuity in Youth Justice Practice

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Introduction

Since the implementation of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 youth justice policy and practice have been overseen by the Youth Justice Board and operationalised at the local level by Youth Offending Services (drawing upon staff and disciplines from the fields of social work, probation, police, education, health and psychology). Practice has been informed by the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm (RFPP) and the application of an assessment tool known as *Asset*. During the summer of 2016 *Asset* was replaced by *Asset+*, a framework that ostensibly replaces a predictive risk-based model with one that is informed by desistance theory. In October 2016 the researchers began to explore this fundamental paradigm shift in practice and its possible effect on the trajectories of young people.

Background: the Risk Factor Prevention (RFPP) and its Critics

The **RFPP** (Farrington, 2007) has been the dominant model of practice in youth justice since 1998. Whilst the original longitudinal studies upon which the paradigm are based have undoubtedly yielded important insights into the profile of those who offend, the methodological basis of this work has been open to serious critical challenge (Case, 2007; Case & Haines, 2009; Haines & Case, 2015); not least in respect of hindsight bias, the conflation of correlations with causes and misplaced therapeutic optimism amongst some policy-makers and practitioners whereby early intervention in family life is believed to remedy the risk of future offending.

The *Edinburgh Study* (McAra & McVie, 2007a, 2007b; 2010; 2012) highlights some of the risks posed by *social processes* and *systems*. Four key findings emerge from the Edinburgh data:

- Persistent serious offending is associated with victimisation (e.g, abuse and neglect), acute vulnerability and social adversity.
- Early identification of 'at risk' children is not an exact science. It also poses the risk of labelling and stigmatisation (thus increasing the risk of offending and criminalisation).
- Pathways into and out of offending are facilitated or impeded by 'critical moments' and 'key decisions' made by practitioners and others.
- Diversionary strategies facilitate the **desistance process**.

Background: Desistance Theory

Given that youthful offending is arguably normative, asking why young people desist from offending rather than asking why they commence in the first place represents a very different starting point (McNeil, 2006). The desistance literature can broadly be divided under three main theoretical headings: **individual, structural and integrative**.

- **Individual theories** include a set of explanations based on maturational processes being allowed to take their course (Glueck and Glueck 1940; Rutherford, 1986), including the onset of cognitive, emotional and moral development (Cornish and Clarke 1986; Barry 2006).
- A **structural account** includes access to material opportunities such as education, employment and constructive leisure, but also the corresponding social bonds of stable family life, pro-social friendship networks and fulfilling personal relationships with spouses, partners and work colleagues (Hirschi 1969; Rutter 1996; Sampson and Laub 1993 and 1995; Shover 1996). The impact upon young people of the various 'systems' with which they interact, moreover, are considered important (Haines and Drakeford 1998)
- **Integrated theories** attempt to combine both individual and structural perspectives (McNeill 2006; Maruna and Immarigeon 2008). This approach also draws upon the narrative accounts of those who have actually given up offending (Williamson 2004; MacDonald, 2006). What emerges clearly is the importance to individuals of being able to shuffle off the self-image of 'offender' and assume the identity of a pro-social citizen.

Research Aims and Themes

- To capture the implementation process of *Asset+* and desistance-led practice within a Welsh Youth Offending Service.
- To explore the extent to which the shift to a new theoretical paradigm is understood and supported **in practice** within both the Youth Offending Service and the Youth Justice Board.
- To consider the impact of the new practice paradigm on young people.
- To consider how the YOS works within and across different systems.

Research Methods

- Single Case Study Design
- Semi-structured interviews and Focus Groups with practitioners, managers, young people and key informants from partner agencies.
- Observation of selected YOS meetings.
- In-depth case file analysis, including techniques of textual analysis drawn from the disciplines of literary criticism and narrative criminology (Evans, 2016)

Interdisciplinary Theoretical Context of Change

- Bourdieu's theories (1990) suggest it is likely that the future of youth justice work following the introduction of *Asset+* and desistance-based practice is unknowable to a significant degree.
- Bourdieu argues that the detail of practice that emerges will be not precisely that which was envisaged by government and managers, nor practitioners.
- This is because change and organisational culture and behaviour are the outcome of the complex interplay of the individual's 'habitus' and the organisational 'field' (Bourdieu 1977).
- Indeed, following the concept of 'hysteresis' changes in 'real practice' may be lagging behind the major structural changes that have occurred and the consequences may not become apparent for some time (Bourdieu 1990; McNeill *et al*, 2009).
- Doherty & Horne (2002) group change into 4 typologies, dependent upon the speed of change and the impact upon the organisation. These are described as Emergent, Incremental, Transitional and Transformational
- Each of these typologies of change is likely to produce differing degrees of enthusiasm, commitment, motivation, resistance and opposition, given that their impact upon organisations and individuals will vary significantly. These reactions will themselves influence the reality of practice that will emerge.

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Zoe Cross, a PhD student, is also involved in the project and will be focusing on the young people's maturational development and the psychological theories that influence practitioners in desistance-led approaches.